



## Coaching Up-Side-Down

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*"Too often we give children answers to remember rather than  
problems to solve."*

Roger Lewin, Anthropologist & Author



Up Side Down

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### Coaching Up-Side-Down

Recently, I met with Peggy, the HR manager of a medium-sized Hong Kong-based company. She complained to me about the lack of buy-in for an initiative she launched a few months ago. "I spent so much overtime to develop this policy and so much effort to train the managers, their staff and our senior managers to apply this new approach but it seems most of this effort was a waste of time."

On request of the COO, Peggy developed a 5-step email policy which should be followed by every employee of the organization. She even got the permission to have a consultant specializing in office organization help her develop the policy.

After completion of the first draft, she presented it to some members of the senior management and got approval for implementation following some minor modifications. She then developed a small handbook with detailed explanations on how to use this policy. All 240 or so employees, from clerical staff to top management got trained on this new approach.

However, when she used a tool provided by the IT department to check compliance with the new policy, she was surprised to learn that only about 20% of all employees were fully implementing the policy. About 15% seem to totally ignore it and the rest was applying it only partly, among them her COO!

Obviously, Peggy wasn't able to achieve broad buy-in *and* subsequent behavioral change as requested in the new policy. In order to understand what it takes to achieve maximum buy-in, we need to understand what it takes to make people actually change their behaviors consistently.

## **Gain greater than Pain**

Most people perceive any major behavioral change as a pain. Changing requires them to leave their comfort zone. Therefore, people are motivated to change if they either perceive a gain that would clearly outweigh the pain of the change or if they fear even much greater pain from not changing.

The good news is that it's all about perceptions and perceptions can be managed in order to influence the buy-in. That seems easier said than done, so how can we do it? To understand this better, let's have a look at the roots of our perceptions.

## **The three levels of perception**

Our perception of which behavior would be more beneficial or painful is typically rooted in one of these three levels:

- a) Personal Values (what is really important to us?)
- b) Beliefs (what do we think about ourselves, others and the issues at hand?)
- c) Attitudes (what are the fixed patterns, often habits, that stem from these values or beliefs?)

In order to achieve lasting behavioral change, a change in the relevant area of these 3 levels will be necessary.

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### **Coaching Up-Side-Down**

## **a) Personal Values**

If any expected behavioral change clashes with the person's values, it is very unlikely that he will ever be willing to truly change.

For example, if you expect someone to work frequently overtime because of heavy work load and if that person's values include spending a lot of time with friends and family, you can be assured of considerable resistance every time you ask him to stay longer.

Unfortunately, it is rather difficult to change someone's personal values. Therefore, if values get in the way of necessary behavioral change, you may need to consider either re-orienting or replacing that person.

## **b) Beliefs**

The good news is that value clashes are not that frequent and that in most cases people resist change because of certain beliefs. Unlike values, beliefs can be changed much more easily.

Most people attempt to change someone's beliefs by providing more or less clear evidence that their own beliefs would be more favorable. For example, if you believe that it would be better for your staff to accept more responsibility, you would probably provide some arguments to support this belief. You might say that accepting more responsibility would be a step forward towards a promotion, etc.

Unfortunately, this approach rarely works.

Through our research we found that there are 3 ways to help someone change beliefs consistently:

1) Through Experience

If we can expect an immediate positive outcome from a behavioral change, then it might be sufficient to encourage the person to simply try it out. If the outcome proves to be much better than outcomes from the old behavior, related beliefs will change at once.

2) Through Evidence

Most people try to use evidence that a in order to persuade. If the evidence is very clear and compelling, this approach may work.

3) Through Insight

Simply telling other people what to do or merely presenting persuasive evidence seldom work to modify behavior particularly when it comes to soft skills (e.g. how we communicate, lead, sell, to some extent manage).

This is true for one of the two reasons:

- People are not convinced, i.e. the belief did not change
- People at first believe, but then notice that the outcome doesn't improve with the new approach and so they revert to the previous approach which was familiar and which at least worked ok.

There is another problem with the first two approaches: they seem to be applicable mostly top-down but not so much with peers or with your boss. In these cases where direct instruction or persuasion are ineffective or not applicable, you may instead try coaching them to arrive at new insights by themselves. The beauty of this approach is that they are much more likely to make a consistent effort due to the principle of ownership. When people feel they own the idea to change, they feel proud and responsible for the idea and its success, so they tend to support the entire initiative more zealously.

To help people arrive at their own insights and lead them to more Eureka ! moments, you will need to understand and learn some basic coaching frameworks and skills. We found that the coaching approach often works so much better to get buy-in as it is non-invasive and minimizes any resistance or defensiveness.

Furthermore, you may coach not only your staff to reach new insights, you may apply the same approach with your peers or superiors. Done correctly, they may not even realize that you coached them.

### **c) Attitudes**

If you suspect that a certain attitude is hindering a behavioral change, I recommend that you try to discover the root of the attitude. This may not be an easy thing to do, as you will need to have gained the person's trust and then find out if the attitude is rooted in certain beliefs (mostly the case) or in certain values.

The problem with attitudes is that they have developed over time and people may not even be aware of them and their causes anymore. Secondly, because attitudes are usually habits that are difficult to unlearn, awareness of these attitudes is just the first step in behavior modification. Even if people accept that they should change their attitude in a certain area, they may still need lots of coaching such as positive reinforcement and follow-up.

To discover the underlying cause of an attitude, you may apply coaching skills such as building trust, being present, active listening and questioning to raise the awareness. Once you know where the attitude comes from, you may proceed to modify the underlying beliefs or values.

If the attitude is rooted in certain beliefs, the change of belief may not yet be sufficient. Make sure you include a thorough follow-up.

### **About Capability**

It is important not to ignore the question of capability. Often, people are resistant to change because they don't feel sufficiently capable of doing things in a different way. There might be no value clash, they may believe that a different way is better, and they may even have a positive attitude towards the required change but resist because of perceived or actual lack of ability. In this case, you will need to check if you need to help the person gain more ability or if you think the person is sufficiently capable, provide lots of encouragement to build his confidence.

Coming back to the case of Peggy, obviously there was a mix of the above factors and Peggy needed to enlist the cooperation of the management to discover the roots and take action accordingly. In the cases of value clash (very few), it turned out that these employees were already creating quite some trouble in other areas and were made redundant if they couldn't be re-oriented to other assignments.

About 20% simply required more training and most of the others either needed some coaching on their beliefs or support in changing habits through positive reinforcement and follow-up.

## **Conclusion**

Training and/or informing seldom produce desired behavioral changes. When required behaviors clash with existing values, chances of a truly successful and enduring change is very slim. When resistance towards change is rooted in beliefs or attitudes, coaching is a very effective approach to achieve the desired change. Coaching can be applied up-side-down, i.e. with superiors, peers and subordinates.



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming excellent leaders for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of over 100 articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" ( see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm> ) which got published in August 2005. Charlie's articles got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive and CareerTimes.

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